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Fun and Games With a CIA Agent

By EDMUND FULLER

William F. Buckley Jr. makes his debut as novelist with "Saving the Queen." It is both a romp and something more. If he had as much fun writing it—and it sounds that way, from its ribald Latin dedication onwards—as we had reading it he may find that he has started something it will not be easy to stop. Like butterfly emerging from chrysalis he may be fiction writer emerging from polemicist, though it is true that these functions can coexist in novels. In part they do here.

Mr. Buckley seems blissfully at home with narrative. This is a lively tale that seizes attention authoritatively and holds it firmly to the close. The style, as we would expect, is witty, crisp; and in this vein less convoluted than he is sometimes known to be.

The Bookshelf
"Saving the Queen"
By William F. Buckley. Doubleday. 248 pages. $7.95.

The time is 1951. Blackford Oakes is a freshman at Yale, delayed in the course of his college career by short service as an ace combat pilot in the European theater of World War II. His studies are again interrupted by a closely secret invitation to consider becoming an agent of the CIA, a capacity in which his good friend Anthony Trust already serves. Blackford becomes a deep cover agent—the most clandestine—and is posted to London where, as a convenient adjunct to his cover, his mother and stepfather, Sir Alec Sharkey, live. Blackford, a social charmer, maintains lavish digs and cultivates a highly-placed set while in working hours ostensibly pursuing engineering research under a foundation grant.

He soon learns the reason for assignment to London. It is the focal point of Stalin's frantic determination to acquire secrets of the American hydrogen bomb, in the making. The Anglo-American agreement stipulates that the British shall be kept informed of the details of progress; information that is known to be leaking to the Russians with dismaying rapidity and completeness. Blackford must find and stop that leak.

As the title foreshadows, the Queen is imperiled in a particular way, which necessitates some explanation about the monarch. As C. L. Sulzberger, another surprising and even later first novelist, did some two years ago in his amusing "Dragon's Teeth," Mr. Buckley uses a lot of real people peripherally: President Truman, Allen Dulles, Gen. Eisenhower, and others, and anything but peripherally, the British master intelligence operator and wartime coordinator of top security, whose code name was "Rufus." And then the Queen of England.

Mr. Buckley had plans for her that would not only have been unthinkable for Elizabeth II, but go so far as to make it less *lese majeste* to kill off the good young Queen and her unborn first child in a plane crash prior to the tale than to involve her in this plot. Thus we meet her cousin and successor, Queen Caroline I, blonde, lovely, unconventional, intelligent, with a lively curiosity about everything, including hydrogen bombs and charming young Americans.

Mr. Buckley often spoofs the genre. Blackford Oakes has the boundless panache and resourceful derring-do of famed archetypes, especially in bed and in his wild climactic piloting of America's then new fighter plane, the F-86 Sabrejet. But he has another side to him, too, which is more significant than the broad strokes of plot in showing the author's real capacities as a novelist rather than as adventure-yarn spinner. Mr. Buckley coolly breaks the ordinary rules of suspense-story continuous forward movement for a two-chapter, 36-page flashback to Blackford's short tenure as a student at Greyburn, the English public school to which he was sent, just turning 16, after his mother's marriage to Sir Alec.

Many other passages also transcend the secret-agent formulae. Underlying all, much-needed now, is a perception of the true nature and necessity of our currently sore-besieged intelligence community. One is tempted to guess that he had his whole story framed, perhaps partly or wholly written, by the time the CIA came under recent attack for improprieties. Whether that be so or not, he has boxed it between skillful brief Prologue and Epilogue involving hearings of the Rockefeller Panel, some of whose members (but not its chairman) would be pleased to report "that we have been lying, stealing, killing, bribing, forging . . . fornicating . . . as a matter of official foreign policy for 25 years. They're not interested in what takes up 99% of our time, which is studying the rainfall in the Ukraine."

Mr. Buckley affirmed in a March 1975, column, included in last fall's collection, "Execution Eve," that he was himself briefly with the CIA in the period loosely corresponding to the internal time of this novel. He is not Blackford Oakes (which is regrettable) but his background knowledge of the era and the institution are the basis for some of the substance underlying the tale, especially as pertaining to the gravity of leaks about nuclear and thermonuclear weapons.

His comic sense never fails him. Among other pleasures it provides undoubtedly the only Paris-brothel scene in all literature in which the redoubtable Madame is looking up "Symbiose" in Larousse and reading aloud the definition while the girls have begun business with the clients in the same room.

Nor is his political poniard sheathed. Re the Soviet grain deals, someone reflects in the Epilogue that "he could not even remember . . . whether Earl Butz . . . was the American, or the Soviet, Agricultural Minister, and he was not able to infer from his actions . . . which of the two posts he served." One of the most tempting lines to quote unhappily bears substantively on plot developments and must be forborne.

You shouldn't miss "Saving the Queen," either for its lively fun or for the shrewd, balanced insights into the global power struggle circa 1950-52, and certain past and present realities of what Allen Dulles called "the craft of intelligence."